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ABSTRACT

The chief advantage of the use of a computer in a basic reading and writing class is that it helps the instructor do more with greater ease and comfort in less time. Initial problems associated with the use of a mainframe computer for instruction were: few programs which met the needs of community college students; lack of knowledge on how to train the students; difficulties in measuring gains; user resistance; lack of a strategy for its use; and possible faculty objections to students using the computer terminals. Most of these problems have not been solved; however, uses for the computer which have been developed include: (1) provision of diagnostic data through cloze tests, multiple-choice spelling and writing tests, and readability assessments of student writing samples; (2) electronic gradebooks (in the planning phase); (3) student-teacher communication by electronic mail; (4) drill and practice; (5) sharing of essays among classmates; (6) reduction of paperwork; (7) distribution of assignments by electronic mail; (8) individualization of instruction by sending different assignments to different students; (9) computerized availability of instructor handouts; and (10) weekly evaluation of student progress. (DC)

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THE MAINFRAME COMPUTER IN A BASIC READING AND WRITING CLASS

The chief advantage to an instructor's use of the computer in a basic reading and writing class is that it helps him to do more with greater ease and comfort in less time. If the computer does not save time for me and help me to be a better instructor, I--like many other instructors--will not use it.

When I began using the college's mainframe computer with my basic reading and writing students, I found a number of problems. First, there were few programs to meet the needs of my community college students (average age 26, Nelson-Denny Reading Test Scores about grade 11 for comprehension and grade 10 for vocabulary). Second, I was not sure how to train students to use the equipment. Third, there are difficulties measuring gains with classes who have used the computer. Four, I did not know how to deal with user resistance (many of us like using a pen or a typewriter). Another problem was that I was unsure how to use the computer in class--I lacked a strategy for its use. The final problem was what I would do if the program became too successful and other instructors objected to my students' using the terminals. I have not solved most of these problems, but I have developed a few strategies for the computer's use in my classes.

The computer can be used to provide diagnostic data. We are in the process of developing a number of cloze tests so that a student may sit down at a mainframe terminal, and once each week work out a cloze exercise. Because the cloze exercises will be geared to the students' reading levels, the test results should be helpful in evaluating students' progress in the class. We are also working out a spelling program for the mainframe which will test a

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person's knowledge of 300 common words. The computer will present a word spelled four ways, and the student will select the correct spelling; the computer will also keep track of the words the student does not spell correctly. Another diagnostic tool we are developing is a writing test geared to the grammar handbook we use in class. The test will involve 50 multiple choice items to pinpoint areas where the students have problems. The computer will report these areas to the student and keep records for us. The last diagnostic tool is the FOG index. The computer tests students' writing samples to help them improve the general readability of their papers.

We do not yet have a Visicalc program for our mainframe computer, but once funds have become available, we plan to use the Visicalc program to set up an electronic gradebook.

The mainframe can also be used to motivate students. Electronic mail or email is a very powerful tool, and each student in some of our classes is given an electronic mailbox. I send email to students to tell them I am happy with their work or worried about their lack of progress, notes on books and magazine articles I think they might enjoy, and a summary of each day's class.

I hope my students get a feeling that I care about them and about their progress. The notes, of course, can be sent out to an entire class as easily as they can be sent out to an individual student.

The mainframe can also provide drill. Spelling, punctuation, and grammar exercises can be sent to students via email. Writing practice comes from a series of intellectual "Dear Ann Landers" questions designed to get people to think about the great issues that people should think about in college. Topics include questions on the value of a liberal education, women's place in today's world, the value of leisure time, what makes for greatness in a person, human dignity, majority rule, war, and so on.

Networking is another powerful tool. Students work out short essays and then--via email--send them to the other class members. The essays can be sent to the entire class as easily as they can be sent to the instructor because of the computer's email potential. In this way, students have an opportunity to see how their skills compare to other students' skills.

I send the class a list of 25 new vocabulary words each week.

Students are required to read a newsmagazine and write a brief (50 words or less) summary of one article and send it to me via email. This use of email cuts down on the amount of paperwork that comes over my desk.

In elementary school, teachers break their classes down into the red birds, the blue birds, and so on. Many college instructors feel that we, as college professors, are too sophisticated to do this. However, I am sold on the concept of individualization. Using email, I can send different assignments to the various groups in my class. The computer makes it just as simple to send an assignment to one student as it is to send an assignment to ten or twenty.

Another major advantage of the mainframe's email system is that it allows individual communication between the students and the instructor. Students who want additional help or who need clarification of some point only need to sit down at the terminal and ask the question via email.

Like most instructors, I have a number of handouts on how to take a test, how to study for a test, time management, formats for reports, and so on. I keep these reports in the mainframe so that my students can tap into my account for a copy of a handout as they require the information. In this way, they can obtain the information now or after they have taken the class. I, in turn, do not have to keep a stock of papers on 50 topics in my file cabinet.

From time to time, students have questions on why people have comprehension problems, the cause and cure for dyslexia, what do we need to know about phonics, and so on. I have set up an electronic encyclopedia to answer these questions.

We also use the mainframe to evaluate students' progress. Each week, students send an email report to me about what they have learned the previous five days in class. This gives me a chance to correct misinformation; it also forces the student to look at my class to see if it is helping him.

I am certain that the computer does help me to do more with greater ease and comfort. I need more time to accomplish my objectives, but I hope that as I am able to set up programs, the time factor will become more favorable.

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